Arsenal cleanup nearly done

Group: Effort is years ahead of schedule

By Kim Smith
STAFF WRITER

WILMINGTON — One big dirty job is only weeks away from completion and eight years ahead of schedule.

It is the cleanup of the former Joliet Army Ammunition Plant properties, or the Joliet Arsenal as some call it. The property was heavily contaminated due to the bomb making that once took place there.

On Wednesday night, a group of about 15 area volunteers known as the Joliet Army Ammunition Plant Advisory Restoration Board thought they were having their last meeting. A check of the bylaws revealed that the meeting was something like the second to the last meeting. The group cannot officially disband until the U.S. Army officially signs over all the properties owed to the U.S. Forest Service.

"That will take about a year," said Art Holz, site manager for the project.

Instead of disbanding, the group adjourned the meeting to another time to be announced.

Soil contaminated

TNT and tetryl heavily contaminated the soil surrounding the plant as well as the buildings used to store bombs and bomb-making materials.

Kurt Adams, a representative of Montgomery Watson, the company hired by the U.S. Army to clean up the contamination, told the group that 276,118 dry tons of soil have been treated on the land. More than 27 million gallons of contaminated water has also been cleaned.

"We are starting demolition of buildings," Adams said. "The fence will be reused. We try for very minimal waste."

A landfill already on the property was also used for the cleanup.

Dates back to 1939

The are 23,542 acres along Illinois 53 sandwiched between Elwood and Wilmington that have been in various stages of transformation for more than a decade. The arsenal has roots dating back to 1939 when the federal government acquired farmland to construct a bomb factory during World War II. The factory employed 12,000 people in the 1940s and 8,000 in the 1960s.

Many people moved to the Joliet area to find work at the plant. In 1976, that production dramatically declined and the plant was declared excess Army property in 1993.

Today, 982 acres are home to the Abraham Lincoln National Cemetery. The cemetery was dedicated on Oct. 3, 1999, and is the 117th national cemetery within the Department of Veterans Affairs National Cemetery Administration. When fully developed, the cemetery will provide 400,000 burial spaces for service men and woman and their spouses. The Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie will someday sprawl over 16,000 acres. The U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service manages the prairie with help from the Illinois Department of Natural Resources.

"The land that will be conveyed to us will be maintained by the Army," said Logan Lee, supervisor of the prairie.

2,000 acres transformed

The northern part of the about 2,000 acres of the Joliet Arsenal properties has grown into the Deer Run Industrial Park, home of CenterPoint Properties and the BSNF intermodal railroad facility. The developers have acquired additional properties and the park is still growing outside of the arsenal properties.

This summer the International Union of Operating Engineers Local 150 opened one of the largest, state-of-the-art training facility off of South Arsenal Road on the southern side.

ProLogis Park recently broke ground on 770 acres designed to accommodate regional and super regional distribution centers. At full buildout, the park will accommodate approximately 12 million square feet of distribution space.

The Prairie View Landfill also has an address inside the former arsenal grounds.

When the cleanup work began, it was estimated to take until 2015 to complete. Advances in the ways to clean up hazardous wastes have been made in the past decade and are the reason the work will be completed years ahead of the original schedule.

Reporter Kim Smith can be reached at (815) 729-6067 or at ksmith@scn1.com.